



In My Experience: Quality Control of Symposia and Their Published Proceedings

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Source: *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (Spring, 1988), pp. 68-74

Published by: Allen Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3782357>

Accessed: 06/08/2008 17:41

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“IN MY EXPERIENCE . . .”

QUALITY CONTROL OF SYMPOSIA AND THEIR PUBLISHED PROCEEDINGS

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The lack of quality in symposia proceedings has recently been criticized by Bart and Anderson (1981). Their criticisms elicited 2 defenses of publishing symposia proceedings (Capen 1982, Finch et al. 1982). These authors offered excellent suggestions for improving the quality of published proceedings: review papers before acceptance; use outside reviewers; request revisions; reject low quality papers; establish a strong organizing committee; and recognize proceedings as citable works. In this paper we build on these suggestions and offer additional guidelines for improving the quality of symposia and their published proceedings.

PURPOSE

Well planned symposia can bring people together to apply their collective intellects and energies to a problem. Symposia can serve to improve communication among researchers, managers, and administrators. When properly conducted, they offer the opportunity to participate, rather than just listen to papers. Symposia and their proceedings can be a powerful means of presenting ideas; however, their potential has been largely unrealized. We believe that presentation of papers on a common theme is the biggest advantage that symposium proceedings have over professional journals.

There are other, similar meeting vehicles. A workshop, for instance, can be used to bring

together people to discuss a given subject. Workshops usually only address a rather narrow topic, however, and should have a problem-solving orientation. A symposium, as we discuss it, is a 3-5 day, highly structured meeting focused on a single subject.

PLANNING A SYMPOSIUM

Funding

Specific funding sources will vary according to the type of symposium; government agencies, private organizations, and individuals may have interests served by symposia and a quality publication. It is important to approach these groups early because many require some lead time before money can be allocated. It is also important to avoid taking “no” for a final answer; in the year or more it takes to execute a symposium, priorities and personnel in organizations may change. This can result in a more favorable attitude toward a proposal.

Page charges for the papers accepted for inclusion in proceedings are an alternate source of funds. Many authors and agencies are accustomed to page charges; \$35-50/page would generate substantial funds.

Publications

Bart and Anderson (1981) stated that many proceedings should not be published. We agree

with Capen (1982) that many valuable references on our bookshelves are proceedings of symposia. However, we believe that publication is warranted only if (1) the papers undergo critical peer review; (2) the proceedings are published in a readily available outlet, preferably in an established journal or monograph series, or by a reputable press; (3) the publication is widely distributed and advertised; (4) the National Technical Information Service is provided a copy of those symposia involving federal funds (U.S. Dep. Commer., NITS, 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, Va. 22161); (5) the proceedings are given a Library of Congress number; and (6) the proceedings are given an International Standard Book Number (ISBN). The ISBN is provided by publishers; check with them to make sure they obtain one. To acquire a Library of Congress number, obtain a Library of Congress cataloging data sheet (available from Library of Congress or a university press) and send it with page proofs to the Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Division, Washington, D.C. 20540. Additional details on items 4–6 can be obtained from your librarian or publisher.

Many authors are not willing to include their research in an unrefereed publication because it compromises their ability to publish in a refereed outlet. It is important that authors are told early that all papers will be refereed and promptly published in a book or journal with wide circulation.

Probably the greatest criticism of symposia proceedings stems from a single cause, camera-ready copy. It is tempting to cut costs and speed up publication by having authors provide camera-ready copy at the time their talk is presented. However, this precludes effective editing because the author, not the convenors or the editor, has the last say on the manuscript. Better quality is achieved by commercial printing, or at least by using a word processor. Hiring a typist for 1–2 months could result in camera-ready copy at your institution in which the editor, convenors, and session chairs can

have the final say, making the end product more uniform, more consistent in style, and higher in quality.

The need for prompt publication cannot be overemphasized. Convenors have an obligation to the committee, authors, and themselves to be prompt. Publication within 12 months will ensure that the material will get more reviews, generate the greatest amount of new thinking, and thus achieve the original objectives of a symposia to synthesize a subject matter and get a quality product out to the largest possible audience of users. Prompt publication should not be at the sacrifice of quality. This means taking care of most editorial and reviewing chores before the symposium.

We must rigorously edit the papers that we do publish and subject them to the same standards as professional journals. Publication in the large number of journals available today often results in a highly dispersed and uncoordinated information base. Well organized symposia allow a much needed focus. Editors of symposia could combine the focused, integrated approach that symposia permit with the wide audiences that journals provide by publishing symposia as special issues of established journals.

Organization

We suggest that planning should begin at least 2 years ahead of the scheduled meeting (Table 1). Preparation for a symposium begins with the convenor(s) writing down reasons for bringing people together. If the objective is to review the status of a discipline, then specific topics to be covered should be listed. They probably should be problem-oriented topics. Each topic can then be made into a session lasting 4–8 hours. We suggest that working guidelines for a symposium take on the format of a detailed outline for a book. If there is only a general topic (e.g., census methods, breeding biology) and papers are solicited on that topic, it is very likely that the papers submitted will

Table 1. Suggested organizational schedule for a symposium.

Planning and implementation steps	Minimum months before or after
Before symposium	
Selection of topic	24
First organizational meeting	18
Letters to potential reviewers and session chairpersons	18
Letters to potential presenters	18
First public notices published and first public request for abstracts	15
Selection of potential presenters	12
Obtain written commitments from authors	12
Deadline for abstracts	12
Mail out detailed guidelines for authors	12
First draft of manuscripts due	6
Referees' comments on first draft back to authors	5
Penultimate draft of manuscript due	1
After symposium	
Authors' final drafts back to session chairs	1
Final editorial comments on manuscript, prepare table of contents and key words index	2
Manuscript sent to printer	2
Review page proofs	4
Symposium proceedings published	12

be uneven in coverage and redundant. In addition, many may espouse conventional wisdom, while the unpopular, unexplored areas of the discipline go unrepresented and unexplained.

After outlining a potential symposium, discuss the possibilities with colleagues. Identify the audience for the symposium early. Probably the best symposia are those that bring together people who interact dynamically during the symposium. This interaction often results in major or minor revisions of manuscripts and sometimes even new contributions. The final publication is therefore much more than the sum of its parts.

Convenors should choose a steering committee of individuals who are willing to spend

the time to organize a high-quality symposium. Work ethic, ability to communicate, as well as enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject are also important attributes for committee members. We suggest from 6 to 12 people for a committee, including an editor. The main reason for including an editor at this stage is to avoid lengthy editorial revisions after peer review of manuscripts. The committee should consist of individuals who will serve as topic (and therefore session) chairpersons. Topic chairs and session reviewers should be knowledgeable about the subject, articulate, and able to think quickly on their feet. We believe that it is necessary that convenors, reviewers, and chairs provide strong and continued guidance and encouragement to participants. This time commitment should not be taken lightly. In the year before a major symposium session chairs may spend up to 10% of their work day, and convenors up to 25%, in preparation.

Have a formal meeting of the committee at least 18 months before the symposium. Provide copies of the symposium outline well before the meeting, and seek input on topic, format, and speakers. At the first meeting, finalize a time schedule and decide on session chairs, reviewers, length of talks, and time allocated for questions.

We suggest that the format for a symposium should be nonconcurrent sessions with a half day devoted to each topic. Each session should include an introduction by the topic chair, followed by the various speakers, and concluded by 1 or 2 topic summarizers.

Strive for evenness and depth in coverage of each topic. Actively seek unpopular hypotheses. Do not overlook a topic simply because it may be difficult to find a speaker. Seek diversity and breadth of coverage when identifying potential speakers and seek experts from outside North America. Solicit names of possible foreign authors from topic chairs and reviewers. In order to increase chances of participation by foreigners and other key people,

offer to pay all or part of their travel and lodging expenses.

Committees

The steering committee's job is to give overall direction to the meeting and to make decisions regarding content, outlet, and meeting place. Session chairs for the symposium should be responsible for editing 4–10 papers on a common theme, insuring that authors adhere to guidelines and deadlines, and writing an introduction for their sessions. These introductions should briefly review the general topic and set the tone for papers that follow. Topic chairs will also lead the sessions, keep speakers on schedule, and stimulate audience participation during question-and-answer periods.

Topic summarizers should provide editorial comments on all papers before the symposium and write a critical summary of their topic for the proceedings. It is their job to synthesize presentations and to express their views on the perspective and relevance of each paper. It is not unreasonable to select reviewers with different views of the subject matter to insure a point-counterpoint format.

Symposium convenors should review all papers and coordinate the presentations in the various sessions. It is their responsibility to accept or reject abstracts for inclusion in the symposium and to ensure that each submitted paper is reviewed adequately.

When identifying key resource people, do not overlook support personnel such as typists and general assistants. They are necessary to handle correspondence and coordinate logistics.

Location

We suggest holding a symposium in a place that is near a major airport. In addition, a self-contained meeting place provides ample opportunities for casual interactions so vital to a successful symposium. A relaxing place in a

comfortable rural setting is often an asset. We believe that meetings in cities provide too many distractions that tend to draw people away from the symposium.

Arrangements are essential to the smooth functioning of a symposium. A symposium's content is enhanced by the atmosphere created by the location and those taking care of local arrangements. A local arrangements committee should be responsible for planning food, lodging, meeting rooms, registration, and refreshments. Excellent guidelines for this part of your planning are provided by Callahan (1980) and Fazio and Gilbert (1986).

Advertising

After the committee has finalized an outline, it is time to publicize the symposium and solicit speakers. Send notices out to professional journals and newsletters that reach your intended audience. It may take from 6 weeks to 6 months before such an advertisement is published. Make arrangements for repeated advertisement. Obtain the mailing list for professional societies and mail notices to their editors and members. Send copies of the symposium outline and letters soliciting abstracts on specific topics to potential participants identified at the initial meeting of the steering committee, and ask for their ideas on additional participants and topics.

Program

As the deadline for submitting abstracts approaches, identify topics in the detailed outline that are inadequately covered and actively solicit abstracts on these. However, make it clear to those that are asked for abstracts that acceptance on the program is not guaranteed.

Immediately after the abstract deadline, the co-convenors and steering committee should meet to sort abstracts for appropriate sessions and topics. Rank them according to content, originality, and potential for the author to de-

liver the final paper on time. Make selections for inclusion in each session, then send copies of all abstracts to the appropriate topic chairs and reviewers. Stick to the symposium outline and avoid redundancy. The final decision on inclusion should rest with the convenors.

Next notify authors that their abstracts have been accepted and give them the names of the topic chairs. Tell authors what you want covered and give them a detailed list of deadlines. Details for manuscript preparation, page charges, and length of talk should also be provided at this time. Convenors should commit to publishing by preparing a written contract between themselves and the authors for preparing and publishing papers. To assure that deadlines are met, both the convenors and topic chairs should contact each author several times before the first draft of the manuscript is due.

By this time, if abstracts for all topics have not been received, solicit names of potential participants from authors from whom you have accepted abstracts. This is a good way to locate others who may be able to contribute a paper, especially given the lead time that you should have.

Posters should be treated as an integral part of the symposium and fully recognized as important professional contributions. Their use can be an effective way to increase participation by symposium attendees and to give people a chance to present data and hypotheses in a more personal manner. Posters should be grouped by topic and changed every day to coincide with the oral presentations. Excellent guidelines for conducting poster sessions have been written (Frear and Thompson 1982, Fazio and Gilbert 1986).

Papers

When the first drafts of manuscripts are received by the topic chairs, they should be sent for review to the session reviewers, symposium convenors, and if necessary, outside referees.

Reviewers should be given deadlines for returning manuscripts and advised that journal standards will be used by referees evaluating their papers. Inform authors when referees' comments will be returned to them. We believe that it is important that one of the convenors be given the responsibility of tracking all manuscripts to reduce the number of missed deadlines.

First drafts should be carefully examined to make sure that authors are staying on their topic, providing high quality material, and meeting the overall objectives of the symposium. Use of the symposium to present unrelated papers should not be tolerated. This is the time to put symposium authors in touch with each other. Inform them of people preparing papers on related topics and have them cite these papers in their presentation.

People who cannot or will not deliver a quality product on time should be obvious by the time first drafts are due. If you are having trouble with authors at this stage, contact them early, and explain again the need to meet deadlines. Do not hesitate to find a replacement. Also, do not hesitate to add a paper or 2 to cover deficiencies.

After the authors have received detailed comments from a minimum of 3 referees, they can start revisions. It is important to keep in touch with authors and remind them of deadlines and manuscript guidelines during this period of revision. Convenors and referees should identify key papers or subject areas they may have overlooked, and may suggest fieldwork that might be done to strengthen their arguments or alternative hypotheses. High quality slides should be prepared that have been prescreened in a room with dimensions similar to those of the room in which they will be presented. Even the best talk will suffer if the graphics are too busy, sloppy, or small (Fazio and Gilbert 1986).

All authors should have their penultimate version to the session chair 1 month before the symposium. Only relatively minor changes will

usually be made on the manuscript after this. However, the symposium itself will often be a catalyst for extensive revisions of some papers.

CONDUCTING A SYMPOSIUM

Presentations

We have found that 15-min presentations with 5 min for questions are adequate for individual talks. For this to be effective, however, chairpersons must hold speakers to their allotted time. Short talks stimulate the audience to interact with speakers, thus producing better final manuscripts. Paper sessions will go smoothly if all authors have prescreened their slides again on the day of their presentation. The audio-visual people should check all equipment before each session and have extra equipment. It is our experience that each paper session is best followed by a review and commentary by the session reviewers.

We recommend long breaks (with juice, tea, and coffee provided), at least 2 of 20–30 min each, and a long lunch break. Keep the evenings unstructured, but provide a reason for people to gather. We have found art shows and poster sessions with ample refreshments to be very effective. These activities will maximize the time participants have to talk and exchange ideas.

Follow-Up

Give the authors 4–8 weeks after the symposium to revise their manuscripts. This is a critical time for authors to include references and other information obtained during the symposium.

After receiving the final versions of the manuscripts, we recommend allocating 3–5 days for the symposium convenors and the editor to copyedit the manuscripts, and to double-check uniformity of style and format. After copyediting, the manuscripts are sent to the printer.

Page proofs should initially be sent to au-

thors, then returned to the editor. It might be wise to bring in an outside reader during the page-proof stage who would be more likely to pick up mistakes than those who have seen each manuscript several times. This would also be a good time to prepare an index. After publication, advertise the proceedings in professional journals and newsletters, and send copies to review editors of major journals. Wide publicity of a proceedings will increase the chance for a large readership.

CONCLUSIONS

Symposia are an important part of the scientific process and provide a valuable means for the exchange of information. With limited time and money available, it is important that we take full advantage of symposia opportunities to assemble a critical mass of individuals interested in a single topic.

We believe that convening symposia is worthwhile only when papers are presented on a well defined set of topics by people of varying views and backgrounds who are asked to shed light on the vexing problems facing scientists today. Sometimes it is the only way for a subject to be adequately summarized and future directions identified. However, it is not a task to be undertaken lightly. Bart and Anderson (1981) raised legitimate concerns. Our argument would be that, if a topic is worth getting some people together for, and if it is well done, then it is probably worth publishing. We can improve the quality of symposia proceedings by being highly selective in those symposia we convene and in the proceedings we decide to publish.

Acknowledgments.—We thank E. D. Ables, T. C. Bjornn, R. D. Brown, J. L. Congleton, R. M. DeGraaf, J. R. Fazio, D. B. Griffith, D. L. Kulhavy, M. LaFranc, M. L. Morrison, C. M. Moffitt, L. Nelson, Jr., B. G. Pendleton, J. T. Ratti, K. P. Reese, S. L. Scott, C. P. Stone, D. Stone, and J. Verner for thoughtful and provocative comments on earlier drafts of this pa-

per. Their suggestions were very helpful. We thank M. A. Edwards, C. J. Miller, and R. S. Nowack for typing the manuscript.

The Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit is funded and supported by Idaho Department of Fish and Game, University of Idaho, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Wildlife Management Institute. This is contribution 329 from the University of Idaho, Forestry and Wildlife Resources Experiment Station.

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Received 3 July 1986.

Accepted 3 October 1987.

